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ABSTRACT

The parental satisfaction levels of a probability sample of 197 black mothers in the United States were examined. Three-fourths of the mothers described their relationships with their children as "very satisfying." Bivariate analysis showed that satisfaction did not vary significantly by marital status or family-household structure. Multiple regression analysis, however, indicated that mothers with the marital status of "separated" and those without husbands who resided with other adults may have been less satisfied in the parental role. Social participation and income were found to be significantly related to satisfaction. High levels of social participation were positively related to satisfaction in relationships with children, while income related negatively to satisfaction levels. (CMG)

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# PARENTAL ROLE SATISFACTION OF BLACK MOTHERS

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the parental role to black mothers long has been acknowledged. However, as more women head households, this role often becomes increasingly stressful.

Addressed here are the parental satisfaction levels of a probability sample of 197 black mothers in the United States, of whom three-fourths described their relationships with their children as "very satisfying." Bivariate analysis shows that satisfaction did not vary significantly by marital status or family/household structure. However, multiple regression indicates that mothers with the marital status of separated, and those without husbands who resided with other adults may have been less satisfied in the parental role.

# INTRODUCTION

The strong ties between black mothers in the United States and their children are well known, having roots in the African family. Even the disruptions and harshness of slavery did not diminish this bond (Ladner, 1972; Radcliffe-Brown and Ford, 1967; Staples, 1981). In the early decades of this century, Frazier noted the strong attachment that black mothers had to their children, and more recently, researchers have indicated that motherhood may be the most important role played by many black women (Bell, 1971; Besner, 1965; Rubin, 1978). For example, Charles Willie states that for black mothers "the children come first" (1978: 240).

The mother-child relationship may be more important currently for black Americans than at any time since the end of slavery. For example, in 1979, 45.6 percent of black households in the United States that contained minor children were headed by women, and 41.9 percent of all black children resided in families headed by their mothers. Mothers in this situation face severe financial handicaps, as median income for households headed by black women is only 53 percent of that of households headed by black men. This results primarily from the lack of the dual incomes that are prevalent in complete households (Bianchi and Farley, 1979; Bradbury et al., 1979; U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). In addition, strains other than economic inevitably are found in the one-parent family. A multitude of tasks exists that must be accomplished by one parent rather than two; there is the loneliness that may accompany

lacking a spouse; and sometimes there is no suitable role model for male children.

With so many contemporary black mothers facing potential handicaps such as these, the question of their relationships with their children now needs further exploration. For example, do black women who lack the husband in the home derive any less satisfaction from their relationships with their children than do their married counterparts? If they do, is this difference in parental satisfaction also related to other variables, such as lower income levels?

A highly related and relevant question regarding relationships between mothers and their children that is suggested by the literature on the black family is in regard to the potential effects of family extension and augmentation. The structural adaptability of the black family is widely recognized, with the incorporation of relatives (extension) and friends (augmentation) into the household being common, particularly for families headed by women (Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 1972). In some households children are taken in and provided for, and in others, adults are incorporated. For families headed by women, incorporating other adults into the household potentially is advantageous in two ways. First, instrumental functioning can be enhanced as resources can be pooled, problem solving strategies shared, and child care facilitated. Second, support in the expressive realm may exist. Being able to share with others the trials and tribulations of daily life, as well as minor triumphs, can enhance morale greatly. Thus, for mothers without husbands, residing with other adults may help ameliorate disadvantages they would suffer otherwise, and facilitate

their interpersonal functioning. As a result, the relationships between these mothers and their children may be improved. In addition to marital status, then, the relationship of family and household structure to mothers' satisfaction with their children also needs to be explored. Does the incorporation of adult relatives or friends into the household increase the parental satisfaction of black women who reside in attenuated families?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The levels of satisfaction felt by black parents toward their children seem not to have received the attention of prior research. However, some related findings are available.

An early study of a (mostly white) national sample addressed satisfaction with the parental role, but only for those who were currently married. It found that women were more negative toward parenthood than men were, and younger persons were more negative than older persons. There was no significant relationship between level of education and reports of problems with children, but parents with more education showed greater concern and involvement with their children. This concern and involvement included more introspection regarding parental functioning. To contrast, those who reported that they never had problems with their children did not question themselves as parents, and seemed to lack introspection (Gurin et al., 1960).

Although not specifically addressing satisfaction with children, one study has addresssed the satisfaction levels of black Americans on

the related domain of family life. Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) explored satisfaction levels of their black subsample on 15 domains of life, and found that both men and women rated their levels of satisfaction with family life as second highest of the 15 domains. (Highest for the married was marital satisfaction.) For their overall (mostly white) sample, they found that satisfaction with family life was one of the best predictors of overall life satisfaction, and that the major contributors to satisfaction with family life were relationships with children and spouse.

That having children does not enhance overall life satisfaction or happiness for white Americans has been shown by at least three studies (Glenn, 1975b; Glenn and Weaver, 1979; Wilkening and McGranahan, 1978). However, one study of black women found that having minor children had no significant relationship to their levels of life satisfaction (Ball, 1983), and another found that having a minor child was not related to the marital happiness of black women (Glenn and McLanahan, 1982).

## METHOD

Data used for this study were collected in four counties of central Florida. Although to a great extent rural, the area includes a number of small towns and two minor standard metropolitan statistical areas. Multistage cluster sampling and the randomization technique developed by Kish (1965) were used to ensure representativeness of respondents. Comparison of the sample with census data on several standard sociodemographic

variables showed it to be representative (Warheit et al., 1976). A comprehensive interview schedule was administered in the respondents' homes by trained interviewers, with a response rate of 86 percent.

The overall sample consisted of 3,674 persons 18 and over, of whom 197 were black women with minor children at home. These black mothers form the subsample for this study.

To measure satisfaction with one's children, the respondent was asked directly, with fixed Likert-like responses available. (See Table 1.)

Table 1

The independent variables of greatest interest for this study are marital status and family/household structure. Marital statuses are shown in the usual five categories. Far more complex is family household/structure. Typologies of black family/household structure in the United States have been developed by Billingsley (1968) and Williams and Stockton (1973). However, their typologies contain dozens of categories, rendering them unusable for analytical (as opposed to descriptive) purposes. Therefore, a three category typology was developed specifically for this analysis. The typology, shown in Table 2, reflects the presence or absence of a husband or adult friend or relative in the respondent's household.

No differentiation has been made between relatives and friends in constructing the family/household structure typology. Two reasons for this exist. First, support of various types is of interest in this study. Usually, one considers relatives as being more obligated to help than

are friends. However, it can be argued that as one can choose friends but not relatives, in some instances friends may prove to be the more supportive. Whether the person resided with is a friend or a relative, a potentially supportive adult is close at hand. Second, the differentiation between kinship and friendship sometimes is not clear. Those who are close friends may be viewed and labeled as relatives. Some black Americans, like others, blur this distinction. Liebow (1967) discusses this phenomenon among low-income urban men, and Stack (1974) tells us that low-income urban women she studied considered those friends whose exchange behavior was exemplary as being fictive kin. These fictive or quasi-kin, then, are very close friends who are seen as functioning as relatives.

Table 2

The complete family/household category includes women who were living with their husbands, including "common law." In addition, the respondent functioned in the parental role for at least one child under 18. The child may not have been the respondent's own child. The criterion for inclusion was that the respondent be in the parental role. As stated by Billingsley (1968) and Hill (1972), taking children into the household is a highly functional adaptation among black families.

The attenuated family consists of the respondent and at least one minor child. No spouse was in the home, and neither was an adult whom the respondent considered to be a relative or friend. Women in the attenuated situation were heads of household, or in a few instances, were heads of

family residing with others to whom they did not closely relate, such as employers. These women had the burden of caring for at least one child without the benefit of the presence of a husband or other potentially supportive adult. The marital statuses of these women living without husbands were single, separated, divorced, or widowed.

The attenuated but extended or augmented category is similar to the attenuated category, except that also present in the household was at least one relative (who may have been an adult child) or a friend. Thus, in many instances, the respondent did not carry the full burden of family problems by herself.

The numbers of respondents in each of the three categories are shown in Table 2.

Prior research on the general population has shown that variables with a high potential for relationship with subjective well-being include income, education, age, social participation, and health (Alston et al., 1974; Andrews and Withey, 1974, 1976; Bharadwaj and Wilkening, 1977; Bradburn, 1969, Bradburn and Caplovitz, 1965; Campbell et al., 1976; Cantril, 1965; Clemente and Sauer, 1976; Glenn, 1975a, 1975b; Gurin et al., 1960; Palmore and Kivett, 1977; Phillips, 1967; Spreitzer and Snyder, 1974; Wilkening and McGranahan, 1978, among others). Therefore, these variables also are included in the multivariate analysis.

Income includes all money income of the family (or household, if appropriate). An adjusted indicator, welfare ratio, is used. It is determined by dividing total family income by the family's federally

determined poverty level for the year of data collection. Due to the family size and age/sex composition adjustment inherent in poverty levels, this ratio better indicates potential economic standard of living than does raw income. Education data are in seven categories (none through college graduate). Age is age at last birthday. Social participation is determined by a composite score on three items. Item one requests frequency of interaction with nearby relatives, including use of the telephone. Item two requests frequency of "getting together" with nearby friends. Item three asks how often the main church worship service is attended. Total possible scores range from zero to fourteen. Self-evaluated health is indicated by response to an item requesting the individual's assessment of current health. Scores range from one to five (very bad through excellent).

Analysis of variance is used to examine bivariate relationships, with multiple correlation and regression with stepwise inclusion of variables used for the multivariate analysis. In order for all calculations to involve the same universe of data, a case with a missing value on any variable has been eliminated completely from the multivariate analysis. Being nominal level, marital status and family/household structure categories are handled as dummy variables.

Hypothesis 1 states: black mothers residing with husbands have more satisfying relationships with their children than do mothers who are separated, divorced, single, or widowed.

Hypothesis 2 states: black mothers who are without husbands but who reside with adult relatives or friends have more satisfying relationships

with their children than do mothers who reside solely with their children.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

As shown in Table 1, respondents had high levels of satisfaction with their relationships with their children. Three-fourths indicated that they found their relationships "very satisfying," and no respondent indicated that relationships were "not very satisfying," or "not at all satisfying."

Satisfaction levels in bivariate relationship with marital status and with family/household structure are shown in Table 3. Mean scores of respondents in different categories show little variance from each other, and are far from statistically significant. Thus, in bivariate relationship, at least, having a husband in the home cannot be shown to have raised the satisfaction these black mothers felt in regard to their relationships with their children. Similarly, the mean levels of satisfaction varied little between different family/household structure categories, and therefore, incorporating adults into the household cannot be shown to have been influential in bivariate relationship with the satisfaction levels of mothers without husbands.

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Table 3

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The incorporation of the independent variables with the control variables in multiple regression equations allows us to more adequately

assess the relationships between the independent variables and parental satisfaction.

As indicated in Table 4, the separated had lower levels of satisfaction with their relationships with their children than did married respondents, $p < .07$, direction predicted. The other marital statuses did not differ significantly from the married in satisfaction levels. The null of hypothesis 1, then, borders on rejection for the separated, but not for the single, widowed, or divorced.

Table 4

More significant in the equation than marital status are social participation ($p < .05$) and welfare ratio ($p < .01$). Higher levels of contact outside the home are positively related to satisfaction with relationships with children, controlling the other variables. Surprisingly, perhaps, welfare ratio (adjusted family/household income) relates <u>negatively</u> to satisfaction levels. The overall equation is significant, $p < .05$, and the multiple $r^2$ equals .103.

Hypothesis 2 is addressed by the data in Table 5. Husbandless mothers who resided with adult friends or relatives did not have higher levels of satisfaction than their counterparts who lived solely with their children. In fact, the opposite is found. Controlling the other variables, mothers residing in attenuated but extended or augmented housholds had <u>lower</u> levels of satisfaction with their relationships with their children, $p < .05$. Thus, the null of an oppositely phrased hypothesis

2 would be rejected. Extension and augmentation do not appear to have enhanced the relationships of unmarried (and separated) mothers with their children, but, instead, may have lowered them. However, it must be noted that the number of husbandless mothers in the sample who resided with friends or relatives was small (n=21). Thus, this conclusion must be viewed as tentative, and needs further testing.

Table 5

As expected, once again social participation and welfare ratio were significantly related to satisfaction. The entire equation is a slightly better predictor of satisfaction than was the previous one, which incorporated marital status, as here $r^2$ equals .119, with $p < .01$.

## DISCUSSION

That these black mothers expressed high levels of satisfaction with their relationships with their children is convincingly demonstrated, as three-fourths selected the most favorable available response. This finding probably comes as no surprise to many observers of the black family. However, the lack of variance in responses makes comparisons between marital status and family/household structure categories difficult.

The multivariate finding that the separated were less satisfied with relationships with their children, $p < .07$, indicates that stress may have been associated with the parental role for these women.

Separation is traumatic for those involved, and this applies to the parents and their children. The mother usually assumes additional roles, the family frequently experiences rapidly and severely diminished income, and children often feel guilt and anger as their world changes dramatically. A major and often negative change in the lives of mother and children, then, may be the underlying factor in the lower satisfaction levels of separated women.[1]

Divorced, single, and widowed mothers' mean satisfaction levels do not differ significantly from that of married mothers. However, sample sizes for these statuses are small (10, 25, and 24, respectively), making comparisons tenuous.[2]

The relationship between extension or augmentation and satisfaction was opposite to that originally hypothesized. In fact, these mothers without husbands who resided with other adults showed less parental satisfaction than their counterparts living only with their children. This may be due to several factors. Many mothers with children who share housing with adults may do so not from choice, but from necessity. In many instances, they may feel that they lack the financial or emotional resources needed to raise their families without the assistance of other adults. Thus, they may feel a burden regarding their children that is not as heavily shared by those who retain more autonomy by maintaining separate households. Other factors such as crowding may be involved. Households shared with other adults can be expected to provide less space per person, and in many instances these other adults also have children, thus exacerbating the situation. If other children

are not present, fear that the noise and general disarray that often accompany children will inconvenience and perhaps irritate the other adults will be stressful for some mothers. In such a situation, satisfaction with children can be expected to be lessened. Again, however, the small sample size involved must be noted, as families in the attenuated but extended/ augmented category number only 21. Therefore, this finding also requires validation with larger samples.

The importance of the social participation and welfare ratio variables must be noted, as they are the best satisfaction predictors noted. Contacts outside the family appear to be important for these women, as enhancement of their relationships with their children is associated with these contacts. Women who were not involved with relatives, friends, or church were less satisfied with the parent/child relationship. The inverse relationship between welfare ratio and satisfaction with children was unexpected. This finding contrasts with the positive relationship between income and overall life satisfaction for blacks found by some researchers, who, however, did not adjust income for family size (Bradburn, 1969; Campbell et al., 1976). That higher incomes are involved with less parental satisfaction may result from several factors. Parents with higher incomes may have higher expectations of their children, which may be harder to gratify. They may be more aware of problems associated with their children, such as behavioral problems at school, and low grades. (As stated previously, Gurin et al. (1960) indicated that parents who reported no problems with their children seemed to lack introspection.) To the contrary, in some instances, those with higher incomes may have less relative interest in

their children, as more roles may exist for them, and provide them with satisfaction. Finally, is mothers' employment associated with both higher income and stress from having to work and still fulfill the mother role? Education levels within this sample tend to be low, and most of these black mothers who worked for pay probably did so from necessity, and had psychically unrewarding unemployment.

Some methodological problems presented by this research must be noted. Already mentioned are the small numbers of respondents in some categories. That some respondents have both adult and minor children also has the potential for affecting the findings. Their attitudes undoubtedly are influenced by their relationships with their adult offspring, as well as by those with their dependent children. More important, however, are potential measurement problems. In their large (primarily white) sample, Gurin et al. (1960) found that direct measures showed uniformly high levels of happiness in the parental role. Therefore, they developed more indirect assessments, which they felt led to responses less influenced by social expectations. This tactic also may be needed in order to provide more variance in the responses of black mothers regarding their parental satisfaction. The minimal variance in scores found may result partially as an artifact of the measurement technique.

## CONCLUSION

The contention by both early and contemporary writers that the mother-child bond is very important to black Americans seems substantiated,

as black mothers are shown to derive positive satisfaction from the parental role. This high level of satisfaction exists in spite of the handicaps that many black mothers currently and historically have faced. However, it appears that at least two situations investigated here may involve lower levels of parental satisfaction. These are (1) separation, and (2), for mothers without husbands, residing with other adults. Additional research with larger samples and less direct measures is needed for further investigation of this important topic.

NOTES

[1]It must be noted that relief rather than distress sometimes accompanies separation. The disintegration of the marriage may mean the ending of a situation that has deteriorated to an intolerable state for children as well as adults.

[2]Some studies (e.g. Campbell, et al., 1976) combine the separated and divorced categories. This may obscure important differences that exist between the two statuses. For example, it was found that the overall life satisfaction of these separated black women was significantly lower than it was for the divorced women (Ball, 1983), and the divorced women were significantly higher on global psychiatric well-being than were the separated (Warheit, et al., 1976).

TABLE 1. Respondents' Levels of Satisfaction With Children

How satisfying is your relationship with your children? Would you say:

| Response | Score | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very satisfying | 4 | 149 | 75.6 |
| Fairly satisfying | 3 | 39 | 19.8 |
| Mixed feelings | 2 | 9 | 4.6 |
| Not very satisfying | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Not at all satisfying | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | | 197 | 100.0 |

TABLE 2. Family/Household Structure Typology

| Number and Percent of Respondents N | % | Family/Household Structure Category | Husband | Minor Child | Adult Friend or Relative (Including Adult Child) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 96 | 48.7 | Complete | Yes | Yes | Yes/No |
| 80 | 40.6 | Attenuated | No | Yes | No |
| 21 | 10.7 | Attenuated and Extended or Augmented | No | Yes | Yes |
| 197 | 100.0 | | | | |

TABLE 3. Satisfaction With Children, Bivariate Analysis

| Variable | N | $\bar{X}$ | S.D. | F | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MARITAL STATUS | 197 | 3.71 | .55 | .78 | NS |
| Single | 25 | 3.80 | .41 | | |
| Married | 96 | 3.72 | .54 | | |
| Widowed | 24 | 3.63 | .65 | | |
| Separated | 42 | 3.64 | .62 | | |
| Divorced | 10 | 3.90 | .32 | | |
| FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE | 197 | 3.71 | .55 | .79 | NS |
| Complete | 96 | 3.72 | .54 | | |
| Attenuated | 80 | 3.74 | .57 | | |
| Attenuated and Extended or Augmented | 21 | 3.57 | .51 | | |

TABLE 4. Parental Role Satisfaction by Marital Status, Multiple Stepwise Regression Model.

| Variable | B | B* | SEB | F | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social participation | .037 | .195 | .015 | 6.357 | .05 |
| Welfare ratio | -.120 | -.230 | .046 | 6.834 | .01 |
| Widowed | -.143 | -.087 | .149 | 0.920 | NS |
| Separated | -.180 | -.132 | .118 | 2.328 | .07 |
| Age | -.003 | -.079 | .004 | 0.611 | NS |
| Single | -.090 | -.052 | .151 | 0.352 | NS |
| Divorced | .089 | .037 | .192 | 0.213 | NS |
| Health | .018 | .028 | .052 | 0.125 | NS |
| Education | .007 | .016 | .041 | 0.131 | NS |
| Constant -- includes married | 3.609 | | | | |

| | df | Sum of Squares | Mean Square | F | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 9 | 5.134 | 0.570 | 1.960 | .05 |
| Residual | 154 | 44.817 | 0.291 | | |

Standard error of the estimate: .539

| Variable | R | Multiple R | Multiple $R^2$ | $R^2$ Change | Adjusted $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social participation | .192 | .192 | .037 | .037 | .031 |
| Welfare ratio | -.181 | .266 | .071 | .034 | .059 |
| Widowed | -.094 | .285 | .081 | .010 | .064 |
| Separated | -.056 | .307 | .094 | .013 | .071 |
| Age | -.082 | .313 | .098 | .004 | .069 |
| Single | .054 | .317 | .101 | .003 | .066 |
| Divorced | .079 | .319 | .102 | .001 | .062 |
| Health | .056 | .320 | .103 | .001 | .056 |
| Education | .001 | .321 | .103 | .000 | .050 |

TABLE 5. Parental Role Satisfaction by Family/Household Structure, Multiple Stepwise Regression Model.

| Variable | B | B* | SEB | F | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social participation | .038 | .201 | .014 | 6.967 | .01 |
| Welfare ratio | -.123 | -.235 | .045 | 7.502 | .01 |
| Attenuated/ext/aug. | -.325 | -.175 | .150 | 4.725 | .05 |
| Age | -.003 | -.079 | .004 | 0.865 | NS |
| Complete | .059 | .053 | .093 | 0.398 | NS |
| Education | .019 | .041 | .041 | 0.208 | NS |
| Health | .011 | .016 | .051 | 0.046 | NS |
| Constant -- includes attenuated | 3.526 | | | | |

| | df | Sum of Squares | Mean Square | F | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 7 | 5.930 | .847 | 3.002 | .01 |
| Residual | 156 | 44.021 | .282 | | |

Standard error of the estimate: .531

| Variable | R | Multiple R | Multiple $R^2$ | $R^2$ Change | Adjusted $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social participation | .192 | .192 | .037 | .037 | .031 |
| Welfare ratio | -.181 | .266 | .071 | .034 | .059 |
| Attenuated/ext/aug. | -.161 | .325 | .106 | .035 | .089 |
| Age | -.082 | .339 | .115 | .009 | .092 |
| Complete | .038 | .342 | .117 | .003 | .089 |
| Education | .001 | .344 | .118 | .001 | .085 |
| Health | .056 | .345 | .119 | .000 | .079 |

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